

# Bonding for a lifetime

Alumni from **boarding schools** are giving back to their alma mater, and it is **much more than just money.**

CHITRA NARAYANAN

Nostalgia can lead to unexpected turns in life. For Delhi-based photographer Dileep Prakash, revisiting the second home of his past — his boarding school Mayo College — set him off on a quest that resulted in an evocative book called *What Was Home*.

What started out as a sentimental visit to his alma mater became a contemplative journey that looked through the lens at 19 of India's colonial-style boarding schools — 18 of them over a hundred years (Doon School aged 75 being the exception). The results are up on the walls of Photoink, a gallery in New Delhi, at an exhibition that will run till May-end.

The pictures are not what you expect — no schoolboys cavorting in the frames, hardly any human figures, and no grand facades. Instead the black and white pictures depict mostly inside spaces that look spartan, regimented and even uncomfortable. The dorms, classrooms, assembly halls, wash-basins with telling graffiti scrawled on walls behind, really do look as though they belong to another century.

As you move from wall to wall inspecting the 40-odd pictures, what strikes is the similarity between these institutions. Without the caption, even those who studied there may be hard pressed to tell Mussoorie's Oak Grove apart from Bishop Cotton Shimla or a Lawrence Sanawar from Mayo.

"There was no conscious effort to make the schools look similar. In Mayo, I photographed places as I recalled them. In the other schools, I photographed spaces that recalled the same sense of familiarity and memories," says Prakash.

The starkness in these visuals almost

makes it seem as though Prakash had unhappy memories of school.

He refutes this. "Like a lot of children, I was lonely and homesick to begin with. But as I grew older, I got used to being away from home. I have fond memories of breaking bounds to watch films, midnight feasts, cooking in the dorm after the house tutor had retired for the night," he says.

Most Old Boys tend to wear rose-tinted spectacles when they look back at their schools, so Prakash's introspective look at his alma mater is as open to misunderstanding as the controversial film *Dazed in Doon* which created a furore last year. Son of fashion designer Ritu Kumar, Ashvin Kumar made the documentary — incidentally commissioned by the school itself — on the occasion of Doon's 75th anniversary. But his version of life at Doon was not acceptable to the school authorities.

Filmmaker Anurag Kashyap too has in recent years made several cutting remarks about his years at the Scindia School in Gwalior. Clearly, we can expect many divergent views in the days to come on these elitist institutions, contrasting with the traditional glowing references given by Old Boys.

## GET-TOGETHERS

On the other hand, there is also no stopping the exuberant rush of nostalgic meetings that alumni from these haloed institutions are holding and the heavy contributions flowing back from old students.

Last Saturday, over 200 Old Lawrencians gathered at Kadamane House, off East Coast Road in Chennai. Representing batches from 1959 to 2011 — that's 52 years of the school's hoary old history — they lustily sang their school song and allowed free rein to their



nostalgic anecdotes. "Can you believe we had every class from 1959 onwards represented except for three batches in between," exults Joseph John, President, NSK India Sales, who coordinated the mega dinner.

But, it was not all fun and catching up and sentimentality — proceeds from the ticketed dinner are going to The Lovedale Trust.

John said the alumni, through the Trust, sponsors the education of underprivileged children in this school.

## GENEROUS PATRONAGE

The lakh-odd rupees collected at that one dinner, in fact, is small change compared with the kind of contributions that many alumni from these boarding schools are making to restore the former glory of these institutions. For Lawrence School Sanawar, the graduating batch of 1987, which includes the likes of former country head of GE India, Tejpreet Chopra, has set stiff targets of raising Rs 10 crore to help in modernisation efforts.

**School memories:** A photograph taken by Dileep Prakash at Sherwood College, Nainital. (top) Students of the class of 1979 of Lawrence school, Lovedale, after a cricket match with the school team.

Similarly, many of the Modis, who studied at the Scindia School, have been generous patrons of their alma mater.

Old industrialists have always helped their alma mater, and tended to help out their school chums — the school tie has helped many an executive get a job because of the clubbiness that comes from belonging to these institutions.

But now, even as some of the eliteness is ebbing, there's also new money from professionals in the software sector and other corporate jobs whose hefty earnings are pouring into these schools.

They are also giving back more than money by contributing with ideas, vision and a large chunk of their time. Joseph John mentions how of his school's seven Board members, five are now Old Students — among them Nomita Chandy, M. M. Murugappan, Vice-Chairman of the Murugappa Group and Joseph Vellapally, a senior advocate in the Supreme Court.

## CHANGE MAKERS

From IT adoption to new thinking, NIIT's founder Rajendra Pawar has been a driving force in the change sweeping through Scindia School, as have been Bharat Patel, former chairman of Procter and Gamble, and a host of other India Inc CEOs.

Harpal Singh, Chairman Emeritus, Fortis group, who studied at Doon and is now closely associated in modernisation efforts at three boarding schools — Scindia, Doon and Yadavindra Public School — sounds almost annoyed that many of his contemporaries have not sent their children to their residential institutions.

"I feel concerned that the trend to send kids to boarding schools has come down.

Part of this is sadly because of over-concerned parents. They are far more protective, not allowing children to take risks," he says. But his faith is unshakeable and he has sent his daughter as well as grand daughter to Lawrence School, Sanawar.

"I have had the most fantastic relationships from Doon School. Be it Dhruv Sawhney, Dipak Narula, Arun Bharatram, there are so many, contemporaries and juniors. I could at least name 50 of them with whom the relationship from school has endured," he says.

Singh is also pleased that fraternity building activities from these institutions are becoming stronger, and many more are getting together to give back. "Most of these boarding schools are going through the transition of upgrading infrastructure and this is the time to give back," he says.

## GLOBAL COLLECTIVES

Interestingly, even as the individual school alumni groups are bonding more, as a collective too, a momentum is building up. In North America, alumni from 15 Indian boarding schools including Doon, Mayo, Lawrence, Scindia and Daly have got together and formed a unified association. The brainchild of New-York based Jitendra Mucchal, Secretary of the Scindia Old Boys' Association (SOBA), North America, the unified get-together idea has been a big hit, he says.

Inspired in many ways by the Pan IIT association, the idea of banding together is to multiply the giving back. As Niraj Lal, President of SOBA, North America, puts it, "As a bigger cohesive group it will allow us to have more clout and be as effective as we would all like to be."